

3

Prehistoric Western Europe

Learning Objectives

The following summarizes what a student should have learned from reading this chapter of *A History of Western Art*.

It is assumed that students can identify all works by title, artist (if known), culture (or nationality) and time period, medium, and style. It is also assumed that students will look up and be able to define the bolded key terms. In addition, further examples of what a student should be familiar with are listed below.

After reading Chapter 3, students should be able to do the following:

1. Identify the following sites on the map of Western Europe: Stonehenge, Neanderthal, Carnac, Lascaux, Chauvet.
2. Define menhir, dolmen, cromlech, megalith, and monolith.
3. Distinguish between Paleolithic and Neolithic cultural organization.
4. Review different theories about the meaning of the *Venus of Willendorf*.
5. Identify and define the categories and techniques of creating sculpture used by prehistoric artists.
6. Describe the style of the Lascaux paintings and compare them with Australian rock paintings. Consider style and content.
7. Describe the development of Stonehenge from c. 3000 B.C. to c. 1800 B.C. Discuss some of the theories about its significance, and describe its system of elevation and the nature of its site.
8. Explain why the discoveries at Chauvet are important.

Lecture Outline

- A. The Stone Age
 - a. Scholars divided the Western European Stone Age into three periods:
 - i. Paleolithic (“old stone”)—earliest and longest period
 - ii. Mesolithic (“middle stone”)—transition period
 - iii. Neolithic (“new stone”)—from hunting-gathering to farming
 - b. The periods are known as the Stone Age from mankind’s use of stone tools and weapons during the era
- B. Paleolithic (c. 1,500,000–c. 8000 B.C.)
 - a. Nomadic hunters and gatherers; lived communally

- b. Sculpture
 - i. Carving—a subtractive process
 - ii. Modeling—an additive process
 - iii. Categories of Sculpture
 - 1. In the round—completely detached from its original material
 - 2. In relief—more pictorial than sculpture in the round
 - 3. High relief
 - 4. Low relief or bas-relief
 - 5. Sunken
- c. Painting
 - i. Pigment—the basis of color
 - 1. Medium or binder—adheres the pigment to the support
 - 2. Vehicle—also known as a medium or binder
 - 3. Support—the surface being painted
 - ii. The Chauvet Cave
 - 1. Ardèche Valley—southeast France
 - 2. Contains over 300 wall paintings
 - 3. Paintings radiocarbon-dated to as early as 30,000 B.C.
 - iii. The Lascaux Cave
 - 1. Dordogne region of France
 - 2. A wide range of animals species adorn the walls
 - 3. Artifacts found at the site include painting materials
 - 4. Paintings are among the best examples of Paleolithic artists’ ability to create the illusion of motion
 - 5. Site dates to 15,000 B.C.
- C. Beyond the West: Rock Paintings of Australia (c. 75,000/50,000 B.C.–present)
 - a. Stone tools and other objects suggest Australia was inhabited as long ago as 174,000 B.C.
 - b. Carved and painted rocks date from roughly 70,000 B.C.
 - c. Similarities between European Paleolithic and Aboriginal rock paintings, even though there was no contact or exchange
- D. Mesolithic (c. 8000–c. 6000/4000 B.C.)
 - a. Transitional period more noteworthy for its cultural and environmental changes than for its art
- E. Neolithic (c. 6000/4000–c. 2000 B.C.)
 - a. Revolutionary shift from hunting and gathering to farming contributed to the development of a new art form: monumental stone architecture
 - b. Menhirs—upright stone monoliths (single stones)
 - i. Erected individually, in clusters, or in rows
 - c. Dolmens—chambers or enclosures consisting of two or more vertical stones supporting a large single stone
 - d. Cromlechs—megalithic structures in which menhirs form circles or semicircles.
 - i. Stonehenge cromlech functioned as a celestial calendar
 - ii. Scholars theorize that rites, processions, and sacred dances were held in and around megalithic structures

- e. Post-and-Lintel Construction
 - i. A construction method comprised of vertical support (post) and horizontal span (lintel) elements
 - ii. Mortice and tenon joinery used to fix the post and lintel

Key Terms

binder, binding medium
cromlech
dolmen
fired
kiln
medium
megalith
menhir
modeling
monolith
pigment
post-and-lintel construction
relief (low relief, high relief)
sculpture in the round
sunken relief, incised
support
tenon
trilithon
vehicle

Arts and Artists

This is a list of all the key works in this chapter.

3.1 *Venus of Willendorf*, from Willendorf, Austria, c. 25,000–21,000 B.C.

3.2 *Venus of Laussel*, from Laussel, Dordogne, France, c. 25,000–23,000 B.C.

3.3 Left section of the “Lion Panel,” Chauvet cave, Ardèche Valley, France, c. 25,000–17,000 B.C.

3.4 Hall of Running Bulls, Lascaux, Dordogne, France, c. 15,000–13,000 B.C.

3.6 “Chinese Horse,” Lascaux, Dordogne, France, c. 15,000–13,000 B.C.

3.7 Men and women hunting kangaroos, Unbalanya Hill, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia

3.8 Alignment of menhirs, Carnac, Brittany, France, c. 4000 B.C.

3.9 Dolmen, Crucuno, north of Carnac, Brittany, France, c. 4000 B.C.

3.10 Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, England, c. 2800–1500 B.C.

3.14 The inside ring of Stonehenge

Discussion Questions

1. Although many people today appreciate the aesthetic quality of prehistoric artworks, we cannot know for certain that the people who created them intended them to have aesthetic qualities or to serve as works of art as we would understand that phrase. What aesthetic qualities do prehistoric works of art seem to possess? Does the modern appreciation of these works indicate that they have a transcendent artistic quality, or does it indicate, rather, that almost any object could be regarded as a work of art under the right circumstances?
2. Works of art are often regarded as products of the cultures that produced them. Analyze the existing artwork of prehistoric Western Europe in this light. What does this artwork suggest about the cultures that created it? Are these artworks impenetrably foreign to modern viewers, or do they show similar concerns and values as modern-day cultures? Can we know if prehistoric artists shared our beliefs and values, or might we simply project our own values on their art?
3. Scholars have no way of knowing for certain what works like the so-called *Venus of Willendorf* meant to the cultures that created them. Does this fact limit their value as works of art? Can they be fully appreciated in their own right even if their true purpose cannot be known? Might they be appreciated *more* because their original purpose is not known and audiences can impose their own meanings on them? What does the appreciation of these works suggest about the relationship between artists, art, and viewers?